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Stop Probing CIA Or Abolish It

Editor of the Press Herald:

When David Brinkley, on an NBC broadcast, referred to the Central Intelligence Agency as the best publicized secret organization in the world, he not only stated a simple fact but analyzed one of our intelligence problems. This problem may be summed up in the statement that you cannot have intelligence and publicity at the same time. Since publicity will undoubtedly continue, however, Congress might do worse than to consider abolishing the Central Intelligence Agency altogether.

If it were to do so, Congress should not blame the present or past management of the agency or the various administrations under which it has existed. The fault lies deeper — in the illusion nourished by the electorate (as represented in Congress) that an intelligence agency can be treated as if it were just another arm of the Government, open at all times to the inspection of those who foot the bills. The reason why such an agency cannot be so treated is the same that prompts people not to play poker with their cards face up. Admirable as such honesty might be, poker is not a game that calls for honesty of this kind — and neither is the tremendously expensive international game of espionage.

The laws that protect CIA from promiscuous scrutiny are again under attack in Congress. One representative has said that if his bill placing CIA under congressional control had been passed some years ago, CIA's annual fiascos would never have occurred. In its present mood, Congress may very well feel constrained to provide CIA with congressional aid and direction. If so, CIA's contribution to world comedy will have a good chance of becoming funnier, and grimmer, than ever.

Meanwhile, the President is reported to have appointed an investigating committee. In other lines of business, when an expedient has been tried eight or ten times over a period of 10 or 15 years, and has failed each time, it is given up in favor of some other expedient. Not so with investigations of CIA. These are like a ritual: agency under fire, investigation follows. It then becomes obvious that the investigation did not succeed because soon the same sort of trouble invokes another investigation. This time, according to the papers, Mr. Killian will head the investigating group; and this seems altogether reasonable inasmuch as Mr. Killian headed the last such group, whose success can be measured by the record of the past two years.

One suspects that, in spite of the President's recent request, the press will continue to publicize things that would better be left unsaid. The result, as always, will be that those wanting secret information about the United States can get it free while the American taxpayer has to expend millions to get a fraction of the same type of information about other countries.

What would real improvement in American intelligence require? Basically, a new public attitude in which no one would suppose that he could have his intelligence cake and eat his alleged "right to know" too. No one would then insist on knowing or would want to know how much money his intelligence agency spent or for what — how many people it had or what they did. Few would even know who was its director or who his subordinates. Strange things would happen which would arouse the curiosity of the press, but the press would not inquire into them or give them publicity slanted toward what the press suspected might be their origin. No one would acknowledge complicity in these events.

For this is the way — or approximately the way — in which intelligence operations have always been carried on where they have succeeded. There is no other way.

But given the shrewd guess that the American people will not maintain this mode of operation, by far the best solution for present difficulties would be to return to first principles. After all, America was a pretty good country before it had a Central Intelligence Agency; and in those days, without any guidance from intelligence servants, it practically never got caught with its international pants down.

G. S. Jackson

Cape Elizabeth

(Editor's Note: If the press can find things out they aren't secrets. In the Cuban case there was as much secret information readily available that even the press was embarrassed.)

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